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## The use of motivation in academic excellence

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## The use of motivation in academic excellence

### Abstract

Each student in a classroom is different from his peers and what apparently motivates one child may not work with another. Their personalities are different and this plays a large role in the way each student responds to you. More and more educators are becoming aware that learning is affected by motivation and interest. Think about what motivated you as a student. If any attempt was to be made in inspiring students on their journey through the educational process, it lay with teachers in their methods and manners of encouragement and motivation.

**THE USE OF MOTIVATION IN  
ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE**

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A Research Paper  
Presented to  
The Department of Educational Administration  
and Counseling  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education

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by  
Donald James Blau  
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Each student in a classroom is different from his peers and what apparently motivates one child may not work with another. Their personalities are different and this plays a large role in the way each student responds to you.

More and more educators are becoming aware that learning is affected by motivation and interest. Think about what motivated you as a student. If any attempt was to be made in inspiring students on their journey through the educational process, it lay with teachers in their methods and manners of encouragement and motivation.

Many students in the public schools today are not working to their potential. Many educators feel it is because the child does not care, or that he does not like school, or that he is not trying very hard.

The unmotivated student can be the most disruptive influence in your daily contact with students (Wlodkowski, 1984). The student who does not want to "learn" can be a discipline problem and an unwanted source of stress. He threatens the teachers' self-esteem by challenging their ability to teach.

Many times this student is labeled a behavioral problem and this passes with him from teacher to

teacher. The problem of misbehavior is directly related to his inability to learn. Acts of misbehavior stimulate and reward him and tune out the real problem; his sense of failure. The basic question leads to: How can educators effectively motivate students to learn?

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the meaning of the word "motivation", its relationship with learning, various roles pertaining to the student and the educator, and an explanation of a motivational planning guide with examples that classroom teachers can incorporate into their daily teaching.

When a person accomplishes an objective, learns a new skill, or succeeds in a task, the person is often said to be motivated. When the same person gives up an objective, is unable to learn a new skill, or fails in a task, a person is often labeled unmotivated. We often use this concept to explain why human behavior occurs. Most psychologists and educators describe motivation as a process which can arouse and instigate behavior, give direction or purpose to behavior, continue to allow behavior to exist, and lead to choosing or preferring a particular behavior (Frymier, 1979). It is important to note that motivation is a state of unresolved need or desire existing in a student. Therefore, we cannot "motivate" him. We can, however, manipulate

environmental variables that may result in an increase or decrease of motivation.

Some of the variables known to be related to the amount of motivation are the degree of: (1) relationship of an activity to an internalized goal, (2) success, (3) knowledge of results, and (4) interest (Frymier, 1970).

Frymier (1970) states motivation is that which gives directions and intensity to behavior. Motivation to learn is that which gives direction and intensity to human behavior in an educational context. Learning is a change in behaving, thinking, or feeling. Does a motivated person change more quickly, for a longer period of time, or with more profound effects? The answer to this remains uncertain. There is no conclusive evidence to support the notion that motivation enhances learning (Ebel, 1973). Part of the problem is that there are so many variables that affect learning that it is difficult to isolate motivation and understand its true impact on learning. Student ability, home environment, quality of instruction, type of task, type of setting, and type of learner are some of the variables which must be fully understood. There is evidence, however, that motivation is consistently

related to educational achievement (Uguroglu & Walberg, 1979).

Uguroglu and Walberg (1979) analyzed 232 correlations of motivation and academic learning reported in 40 studies from first through twelfth grades. Ninety-eight percent of the correlations between motivation and academic achievement were positive. This figure indicated that motivation was a highly consistent positive correlate of achievement.

Frymier (1970) viewed educational purposes as hierarchically related, with the most general statement being: The basic purpose of schools is to help children learn. But helping children learn means helping children learn:

1. To value learning
2. To want to learn
3. How to learn
4. To value knowledge
5. To acquire knowledge
6. To understand knowledge
7. To behave according to knowledge.

Motivation presumes valuing and values are learning behavior; thus motivation, at least in part, is learned and it can be taught (Frymier, 1970).



If we appreciate the complexity of the relationship between learning and motivating, we can more readily accept the daily difficulty in the teaching process (Wlodkowski, 1986). We can better realize the need for more effective use of the variables. We can more safely rely on the process or performance of students when they attempt to learn rather than emphasis on product as criteria for effective teaching.

The two most important people to take part in the learning process are the educator and the student. The student's self-concept indicates the manner in which he will behave (Gerken, 1968). Coopersmith (1967) reports that a student's success in school is dramatically affected by his or her self-esteem. It is important to note that the older the student, the stronger the relationship between positive self-concept and achievement (Woolfolk & Nickolich, 1980). The implications of this leave no doubt about the damaging consequences of applying negative labels, such as stupid or lazy, to students. A concept which can be brought into these interpretations is that of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). Seligman (1975) maintains that children can learn to be helpless in school, to believe that nothing they do will be right. "Intelligence, no matter how high, cannot manifest

itself if the child believes that his own actions will have no effect" (Seligman, 1975).

Even though teaching methods may vary from each grade level, several stand out as important to students maintaining their self-esteem:

1. Trust
2. Taking time for explanations
3. Understanding their feelings
4. Showing interest in them personally
5. Given work which is within their capabilities to do well
6. Positive praise
7. Promoting self-improvement and pride (Brophy, 1987).

Many researchers have emphasized the fact that general self-concept can be divided into other parts, some academic and some social, emotional, physical-nonacademic (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). Depending on a student's values and family background, what happens in school will affect his general self-concept. Educators still have the potential to provide experiences from which each student can derive a positive sense of self-esteem.

One of the most studied areas in the realm of student motivational characteristics is the need for

achievement. In general, achievement motivation is the functional display of a concern for excellence in work that the individual values. Individuals with high achievement motivation tend to act in certain characteristic ways:

1. (They) are interested in excellence for its own sake rather than rewards.
2. (They) prefer situations in which they can take personal responsibility for the outcome.
3. (They) set goals only after careful consideration.
4. (They) are more concerned with the medium-to-long-range future than persons with low achievement motivation (Alschuler, 1973).

The educator's role in student motivation involves several aspects: personality, expectations, goals, instructional objectives, feedback, and reinforcement (Wlodkowski, 1986).

For decades, student preferences for teachers remained consistent. Research in 1970 shows that students generally liked teachers who were warm, considerate, cheerful, and friendly (Kounin, 1970). There is little evidence which provides a specific set of traits associated with the type of teacher whose personality would ensure effectiveness.

There is research relating teacher clarity, organization, and enthusiasm to student learning. In general, what teachers do to and with students appears to be much more important than what they appear to be as individuals (Rosenshine & Furst, 1973).

Teacher expectations are a powerful determinate of student performance. Wlodkowski pointed out that if a teacher's expectations are inaccurate or inflexible, it can be harmful to students, especially if the teacher sees the student as a low-achiever.

Based on research and related studies, some recommendations for teachers who work with low-achieving students were identified as follows:

1. Be aware of attitudes and expectations with respect to these students.
2. Have a clear and flexible rationale of these students.
3. Group these students carefully, and continue to review their work to maintain flexibility of placement, especially in relationship to different subject areas.
4. Make sure students have equal opportunity for response during class time.
5. Help these students to evaluate their own work as much as possible.

6. Extend to these students an equal amount of personal regard in terms of proximity, courtesy, personal interest, and compliments (Wlodkowski, 1986).

The kind of goals students set for themselves and the way they set them is a combination of the students' personal expectations as well as their teachers' expectations. Goals can serve at least five functions:

1. Guiding and directing behavior
2. Focusing attention and effort in a given direction
3. Serving as standard for measuring progress
4. Leading to a restructuring of activities that increases efficiency
5. Reflecting values and motives of the individual (Clifford, 1981).

On a more direct basis, research has indicated that teachers may influence the motivation of their students with the use of specific instructional objectives (Wlodkowski, 1986). Behavioral objectives are statements of what a student will do, perform, or achieve when completing a certain sequence of instruction. When the student knows the objectives and criteria for evaluation, the means for self-evaluation of learning are improved.

Feedback is information that the student receives about the quality of his/her performance on a given task. Knowledge of results, written comments, records, or even an approving nod are forms of feedback that teachers often use with students. Feedback enhances student motivation because it: (a) allows students to evaluate their progress, (b) maintains student effort toward realistic goals, (c) corrects student errors without delay, and (d) communicates encouragement from teachers (Wlodkowski, 1986).

Guidelines for feedback are as follows:

1. Provide feedback frequently and efficiently.
  2. Whenever appropriate, let students control feedback.
  3. Make comments specific and suggest corrections.
  4. Avoid sarcasm and personal criticism.
  5. Allow students to revise their incorrect responses.
  6. Have students chart their progress toward individual learning goals.
  7. Use verbal as well as written feedback
- (Worell, 1981).

Praise is considered a good example of positive reinforcement, but some students find it embarrassing

and are very uncomfortable with it. According to Good and Brophy (1980), praise is unlikely to reinforce effectively unless it is:

1. Sincere,
2. Adapted to specific accomplishments in question (please, no gushing over trivia),
3. Adapted to the preference of the individual, and
4. Specific in describing what the student did that was noteworthy.

There are numerous choices educators can make to better facilitate student motivation for learning. The most productive route is to plan strategies for each factor: personal style, situations, student differences, subject matter, cultural values, and tradition. Therefore, there are six basic questions to be considered in teacher planning:

1. What can I do to guarantee a positive student attitude for this activity?
2. How do I best meet the needs of my students through this activity?
3. What about this activity will continuously stimulate this activity?
4. How is the emotional climate for this activity a positive one for students?

5. How does this activity increase student feelings of competence?
6. What is the reinforcement that this activity provides for my students? (Wlodkowski, 1986)

If each of these questions is answered and integrated into the learning experience, students will have an excellent chance of being motivated to learn.

Wlodkowski (1984) identified several attitudes that need to be discussed. The first is the attitude of the student toward the teacher. How do you think the student feels about you? Try to establish a relationship with the student by sharing some experiences with him. Treat him with warmth, acceptance, and take him seriously.

The second attitude is how the student feels about the subject matter. The conditions that surround your subject should be positive. This could include associating him with other learners who are very positive about the subject. Model your own delivery with excited speech, quick movements, be demonstrative and vibrant, and show enthusiasm. Also, the student's success rate is imperative to a positive learning environment.

The third attitude is the student's own sense of worth and his own capabilities. Guarantee successful



learning by praising the process more than the end product. As an educator, think about the things that motivated you as a student, and utilize them in your teaching style.

The last attitude deals with the student's expectancy for success. How well does he honestly expect to do in your class? Talk with him. Set goals together. Follow steps in the learning process that will help him achieve success.

Another set of motivational factors deals with needs (Wlodkowski, 1984). Physiological needs can play an important part in the learning process. Evaluate the student's physical well-being. Whenever possible, adapt your content to meet the physiological needs of your student. Always be alert to restlessness and try to relieve whatever is producing it.

Another need of the student may be one of safety. This may be especially true of a younger child. Does he feel fearful and threatened in his learning environment? Think of anything in the classroom which the student may be wary of and remove it. Create an environment that is organized and orderly. Many times these fears are enhanced with anything unfamiliar. Use analogies to relate familiar things to the object of fear.

A student also needs to feel a sense of belonging and caring in your classroom. Does he have a sense of acceptance in his learning environment? Projects the student completes should be of interest to him. Spend time discussing the project with him and the direction he wants to take. Spend two or three minutes with each student, and keep an index file system on him with key points to help you understand his nature and his needs. Responsibilities for successful functioning should be designated so that everyone is a contributing and vital member of the learning environment (Wlodkowski, 1984).

In summary, a student's sense of self-worth and esteem is of vital importance to his continuing success in the classroom. Give him the opportunity to use a learning mode which compliments his strengths and assets. This can help him strive to become an independent learner, which in turn, can give him options as an adult to become successful. Plan activities which allow the student to publicly display his work and share his talents. There are many options such as school newspapers, public businesses, magazines, displays around the school, etc, which can help the student to achieve a sense of pride in his work.

Self-actualization is the final important need. How do you help the student to achieve his full

potential? Develop classroom projects or assignments that appeal to his curiosity, sense of wonder, and need to explore. Encourage creativity versus monotony. He should be able to feel a freedom of choice and emphasize risk-taking, problem solving, and experimentation.

Finally, I would like to introduce a summarization of principles suitable for application in classrooms.

#### HIGHLIGHTS OF RESEARCH ON STRATEGIES FOR MOTIVATING TO LEARN

##### Essential Preconditions

1. Supportive environment
2. Appropriate level of challenge/difficulty
3. Meaningful learning objectives
4. Moderation/optimal use

##### Motivating by Maintaining Success Expectations

5. Program for success
6. Teach goal setting, performance appraisal, and self-reinforcement
7. Help students to recognize linkages between effort and outcome
8. Provide remedial socialization

##### Motivating by Supplying Extrinsic Incentives

9. Offer rewards for good (or improved) performance

10. Structure appropriate competition
11. Call attention to the instrumental value of academic activities
12. Adapt tasks to students' interests
13. Include novelty/variety elements
14. Allow opportunities to make choices or autonomous decisions
15. Provide opportunities for students to respond actively
16. Provide immediate feedback to student responses
17. Allow students to create finished products
18. Include fantasy or simulation elements
19. Incorporate game-like features
20. Include higher-level objectives and divergent questions
21. Provide opportunities to interact with peers

#### Stimulating Student Motivation to Learn

22. Model interest in learning and motivation to learn
23. Communicate desirable expectations and attributions about students' motivation to learn
24. Minimize students' performance anxiety during learning activities
25. Project intensity
26. Project enthusiasm

27. Induce task interest or appreciation
28. Induce curiosity or suspense
29. Induce dissonance or cognitive conflict
30. Make abstract content more personal, concrete, or familiar
31. Induce students to generate their own motivation to learn
32. State learning objectives and provide advance organizers
33. Model task-related thinking and problem solving (Brophy, 1987).

As educators, we would like to help the student become a person who enjoys and is excited about spelling, reading and computing better--a person who is in the process of becoming a lifelong learner.

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